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ABSTRACT

The philosophy and implementation of the Community Leaders Project at Everyman's University (EU), the Open University of Israel, are discussed. The project is designed to narrow social gaps in Israel by upgrading the educational level of disadvantaged populations and by developing indigeneous leadership for decision-making in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. The social structure of Israeli society and the social context of EU's operation are described for background. Many of the targeted group have not graduated from high school. Special preparatory courses were developed that focused on basic learning skills, as well as fundamental academic subjects. After the 6-month preacademic preparatory program, the students undertake degree-level courses and participate in tutorial study one day a week. Although special assistance is provided to these students during the teaching/learning process, their assignments and final exams are evaluated according to the same criteria as those used for regular students. Information is provided on performance of both special and regular students in five academic courses. The question of whether schools can achieve both equality and quality is briefly addressed, and comments of special program participants concerning the program are included. (SW)

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AIMING AT NARROWING SOCIAL GAPS IN ISRAEL

THROUGH A SPECIAL PROGRAM OF EVERYMAN'S UNIVERSITY

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Educational Studies

Everyman's University

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1. The Problem

This paper analyzes the philosophy and practical implementation of a special program offered by Everyman's University (EU), the Open University of Israel. The "Community Leaders Project" aims at narrowing social gaps in Israel by upgrading the educational level of disadvantaged populations and by developing indigeneous leadership for decision making in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods of the country.

Before analyzing the unique characteristics of the specific program, some basic background information is provided in relation to the social structure of the Israeli society and the social context of EU's operation.

2. The Social Context of Everyman's University

Israel is a country which has grown rapidly during its 38 years of existence. Israel's Jewish population numbered 650,000 when the state was created in 1948. Since then, Israel has absorbed around two million newcomers, over half from Asia and North African countries. Total population in 1985 was over four million, of whom 83% were Jews. About 52% of the Jewish population derives from the Asian-African (Oriental) origin (Halperin, 1984). Ethnicity is a stratifying factor in the Israeli society. Its social fabric

reflects the rapid interweave of Jewish cultures and communities from all over the world into one national design of Western persuasion, despite inherent cultural differences. Immigrants to Israel of Asian-African origin suffered the multiple crisis of: the wealth of their special heritage and customs being unappreciated and downplayed in order to advance national integration; being ill prepared in formal education and particularly in higher education to serve in Western style professions, administrative positions and leadership posts; being largely forced to leave their birthplaces without their personal property; and coping with an identity conflict.

The socio-economic gap between Orientals and Westerners is reflected in post-compulsory education. The proportion of students of Oriental extraction in high-school academic programs is low, and consequently their proportion in university is very low. Among first degree students in Israeli universities, they constitute between 17% to 22% (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 1985).

Everyman's University differs from the other seven Israeli universities in that it provides an opportunity to acquire academic education without formal prerequisites. The policy makers who initiated EU in 1974, planned it to be precisely what its name implies - an educational framework suitable for anyone willing to study, irrespective of his age, background, previous education and place of residence

(Everyman's University Prospectus, 1982). The free admission policy came as an answer to the needs for broader access to higher education and for greater equality of opportunities. The underlying philosophy of this policy is based on the presumption that several sectors of the Israeli population were prevented from studying at university level, not because of any lack of academic ability, but because of various circumstances beyond their control. The free access policy of EU attracted several segments of the Israeli society that otherwise would not attend a higher education institution. Such people include: those who live in geographically remote areas; people who have full time jobs and cannot afford a full time course of study; military personnel; adults who left school without completing the normal minimal qualifications for entry into a conventional university. The latter group is a special beneficiary from EU's free access policy, since otherwise they could not enroll at any other university, in which the minimum entry requirement is a high school matriculation diploma. In this regard, studying at EU can be seen as a social mobility alternative bypassing the conventional schooling system (Goder, 1985).

Since it began its operation in 1976 approximately 60,000 students have taken academic courses at EU. In a typical semester the enrollment rate is around 12,000 students, of whom nearly 10,000 study academic courses and the others are enrolled in professional and continuing education programs.

EU's students distribution by ethnic origin indicates that about 30% are of Oriental extraction, substantially more than their percentage at other Israeli universities (President Reports, 1984, 1985). Moreover, EU's total students' distribution by previous level of education indicates that 68% have a high-school diploma, whereas among students of Asian-African origin only 36% have completed matriculation requirements. More interesting, two studies which investigated the characteristics of persistent students and graduates of EU, found that ethnic origin and the ownership of a matriculation diploma were not significant in explaining success or persistence in studies (Shohat, 1983; Goder, 1985). In this sense, EU provides a real social mobility alternative for talented students of Oriental origin, who were kept out of the mainstream, to catch up with those who had the opportunity to continue higher education after graduating from high-school.

The special program which is analyzed in this paper purports to cater to the unique needs of a very special population by offering assistance beyond the possibilities of the open access policy.

3. The Community Leaders Project

A project of singular importance at EU is a special study program for the leadership of Project Renewal areas. This

project aims to rehabilitate, the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the state. One of its cornerstones is that successful rehabilitation must revolve around people, and involve local population in decision making what is best for their own communities. While the leadership in those areas is blessed with a considerable amount of charisma, intelligence and motivation, they usually have had little more than eight years of formal education. In an attempt to enhance local leadership in the socially disadvantaged areas, the Israeli authorities have allocated funds to provide advanced training for some of the more talented and active inhabitants of these communities. It was aspired that the advanced training would lead to an academic degree.

In 1982, representatives of Project Renewal approached EU with a request for a special group study program, tailored for the unique characteristics of "Community Leaders". It was obvious that such a program has to reach for social goals intervowen with high academic standards. An acquisition of an academic degree might enhance the social status and the self-image of the local leader as an individual, as well as to create a more effective local leadership that will be able to utilize some of the skills acquired through the academic studies also in the public and political activities.

Since one of EU's major goals, as the Open University of Israel, is to reach the intellectually talented populations

for whom conventional university study is not a realistic option, addressing special populations is a "natural" broadening of its initial philosophy. Although the obstacles for designing an academic program for the Community Leaders seemed difficult, almost insurmountable, EU undertook the challenge.

At the very outset it was clear that the necessary study habits, analytical thinking and basic tools of learning were quite far from this specific population. Therefore, special preparatory courses were designed. These courses focus on basic learning skills, as well as on fundamental academic subjects. Only after completing a six month pre-academic preparatory program, the Community Leaders students embark on their first-degree level course. Furthermore, tutorial guidance is offered at a highly concentrated level with one full day weekly devoted to active classroom tutorial study, rather than taking place once a month, as in the university procedure for ordinary students. The students usually get a weekly day of paid leave from their job in order to attend to their studies. Although, the participation in the study group is not compulsory, as the learning material is designed for self-study, most of the students who have participated in this special program feel the intensive tutoring to be most helpful.

In its third year, the program involves 723 students, divided into 16 special study groups. Some basic statitstics

illuminate the unique characteristics of these students. 86% of them are between 26-45 years of age. Only 3% are less than 25 years old, as compared to 31% of the regular EU students. 83% are of Asian-African origin. Only 12% have a matriculation diploma, as compared to 68% of EU's regular students and all of the conventional universities students. At the other end of the spectrum 9% of the project's students have had 8 years of schooling (or less), and additional 50% have had 9-11 years of schooling.

An operation of such a program as the Community Leaders Project raises several basic questions:

- Do the regular evaluation procedures apply for assessing the achievements of this special group?
- Is it advisable also in the future to have special tutorial groups exclusively for these students?
- Is it possible to combine successfully the two dialectical values of equality-quality in higher education?

Obviously, it is too soon to derive final conclusions as to the success of the program at this early phase of its operation. Nevertheless, the experience which was accumulated during the last two years highlights several interesting results.

At the very outset it was decided to evaluate the Community Leaders students on the basis of the same assessment

criteria of the regular students. This decision follows the very basic philosophy underlying EU's open access policy. In other words, anyone with the desire, self-discipline and ability to learn can enroll. But in order to succeed, the student has to prove himself capable of studying at the high level demanded. Moreover, such a decision purported to prevent the creation of a "second best" degree. In this sense, EU was very careful of not following into the trap of lowering its study standards, when opening its gates to an educationally disadvantaged population. The special assistance is provided to the Community Leaders in the teaching/learning process. But their assignments and final exams are evaluated according to the same stringent criteria as those of the regular students.

Table 1 compares the performance of the "Community Leaders" (CL) to that of the "Regular Students" (RS) in five academic courses, which were taught during four semesters in 1983/4 and 1984/5. The data presents the total number of the students enrolled in each group (= the sum of students in the four semesters); the number of students who attended the finals; the average grade of each group; and the number of students who received credit; i.e., who finished the course successfully.

Table 1 - Performance of "Community Leaders" (CL) and "Regular Students" (RS) in five academic courses during four semesters of 1983/4 - 1984/5

Course		Enrolled	Attempted Finals	Average Grade X	Received Credit N	Received Credit %
From Jerusalem to Jabneh						
	CL	419	287	64	244	58
	RS	747	421	68	389	52
Literature						
	CL	79	49	70	47	58
	RS	236	146	76	142	62
Jewish History						
	CL	335	216	60	158	47
	RS	434	308	66	287	66
General History						
	CL	164	98	66	92	56
	RS	323	238	68	222	68
Sociology						
	CL	167	114	58	83	50
	RS	546	335	64	301	55

As it can be seen in Table 1, in general, the academic achievements (grade averages) of the project students are somewhat lower than those of the regular EU students taking the same courses. Their average grades range from 58 - 70, as compared to 64 - 76 of the ordinary students. Also their dropout rate is somewhat higher as compared to the regular students. However, taking into consideration the Community Leaders entry qualifications, it is quite a significant achievement that over 50% complete the academic courses successfully.

The special tutorial groups raise a basic question: whether it is prferable that these students participate in homogeneous tutorial groups where everybody initially is at the same low level, or whether it would be an advantage from the point of view of the students to participate in EU's regular tutorial groups? In other words, is it preferable for the "special" student not to be singled out, but rather to be made to feel like "everybody else". No conclusive evidence has been reported on this point, as far as adult education is concerned. If we were to extrapolate from studies that deal with school integration at the elementary and secondary levels in Israel, the evidence seems slightly in favor of the heterogeneous group (Klein and Eshel, 1980; Chen et al., 1977).

However, taking into consideration the special characteristics of the students in the Community Leaders Project, their age, their lack of study habits and their natural anxiety vis-a-vis academic studies, a compromise solution was reached: The students should take around 6 - 8 credits (out of 18 credits required for the B.A. degree) in the sheltered environment of the special tutorial group. Then they should gradually move on to become regular students at EU. Anyhow, at this stage of the project's operation, no firm patterns have yet been developed, and various alternative options are still being discussed. What is obvious, is that it is possible to teach successfully an educationally disadvantaged population academic courses with

the assistance of high motivation on the students' behalf and supportive teaching strategies offered by EU's faculty.

4. The Community Leaders Project from the Students' Point of View

At this stage,it is too early to evaluate the contribution of the academic studies to the social status and social/ political functioning of the Community Leaders in their neighborhoods. Nevertheless, some initial data was gathered in respect to their feelings about their studies in several discussions and symposia days.

The following are some of the comments of different participants in the project which represent the general remarks expressed in the discussions:

- "At my job, they don't require academic studies, but I feel that I can contribute a great deal more. Courses in Hebrew expression helped me immensely. Everything I do justifies every moment I devoted to studying. This has been my dream for 20 years and I have reached it. I thank the University and am indebted to it."

- "There is a very special atmosphere in our study groups. We have become attached to one another and that gives us a much greater push. To be able to cope with

this material, one needs tremendous will power, and if you don't have it, you break in the middle. This way, each lends a shoulder to the other to lean on."

- "This is the only chance for those of us who never completed secondary school to learn academically. We need the extra support, the study day, for example, every week."

- "I want to advance professionally, get into a better profession and, today, many doors are locked if you don't have a B.A."

- "I feel my horizons have been broadened and that people respect me more. I'm also more sure of myself when I help my children with their school work. I'm part of their world now."

At a later stage of the project's operation, it is planned to carry on an extensive survey and personal interviews with the participants to evaluate the contribution of the academic studies to the personal welfare of the students and their social functioning.

5. The Equality-Quality Dilemma in Higher Education

The Community Leaders project which was presented in this paper touches a much broader question in relation to the equality-quality dilemma in higher education. The university institution is selective by nature, and its raison d'etre is the pursuit of higher academic achievements and the provision of qualitative education. The more an institution gains a reputation for excellence, the more likely it is to restrict the access to a highly selective group of students.

On the other hand, the idea of lifelong education, and the need to respond to the needs of different social groups willing to continue education at various stages of their adult life, seem to be gaining more and more adherents in the last twenty years and challenge the elitistic premises of higher institutions (Boone et al., 1980).

There is an ongoing debate in the modern societies whether fitting adults into the academic settings requires a complete transformation of higher education and a reconceptualization of its underlying values (Harrington, 1977; Solomon & Gordon, 1981). It is not a question of lowering the standards, but rather a problem of adjusting the system to the heterogeneous needs of its extended clientele.

The emergence of distance teaching universities, such as EU in Israel, was a partial and alternative answer to the growing demand of university level education for populations which otherwise would be denied the opportunity to continue higher education. By deciding to undertake a special program, such as the Community Leaders Project that was presented in this paper, EU has embarked on some significant new ventures with possible major implications for the university and the Israeli society at large.

The fact that over 50% of the project's students had completed the academic courses successfully, in spite of their tremendously low entry qualifications, as well as the positive feedback of all the parties involved in the project, encourages EU to widen the scope of its activity.

Moreover, the Community Leaders Project provides an example of combining the two dialectical equality-quality values at a university level institution. By upgrading the educational level of a disadvantaged population, EU contributes to the narrowing of social gaps in Israel, and at the same time it does not lower the high academic standards applied for evaluating the students' achievements. The high study requirements explain the approximate 50% dropout rate - the price to be paid while attempting to combine quality and equality in higher education.

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